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Washington Opera Ball: A Winner Before It Opens

By BARBARA GAMAREKIAN

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WASHINGTON, June 9—"The whole idea is to create an illusion—the dream of a ball in a great castle," explained Countess Ulla Wachtmeister, wife of the Swedish Ambassador, as she fingered one of the beautiful barmers she had created. "When you think of opera, you think of pageantry, and we want it to be a night which conjures up images of castles and balls—and the opera."

Tomorrow night's Opera Ball at the Royal Swedish Embassy, which will benefit the Washington Opera, is billed as "A Night at Gripsholm Castle." And the illusion that Countess Wachtmeister hopes for just may work.

"You just know that if Ulla is involved, everything will be perfection," said one Washington hostess.

"People usually groan when you say charity ball," said Mrs. Frank Ikard, a member of the committee, "but this one has been super sold out—people are begging for tickets."

"Every time someone calls to say they can't come—we say 'great,'" said Ina Ginsburg, who is chairman of the ball. They have cleared \$100,000—enough to underwrite a major share of the expense of one of next season's four scheduled productions.

Guests will be greeted by a mime and costumed jugglers and tumblers in medieval dress as they walk up the circular driveway; they will be serenaded by a Renaissance quartet as they cross a drawbridge designed for the occasion; there will be sentries dressed in costumes from Verdi's "Masked Ball," lent by the Royal Swedish Opera Company; and they will walk through the residence into a wonderland of a banner-flung terrace, yellow and white tents hung with enormous golden crowns, and dozens and dozens of chandeliers strung with tiny fairy lights. And across the sloping lawn, the outline of a Viking ship—again festooned in fairy lights—will make its imaginary way along an illusory coastline.

And then the magic turns slightly more contemporary—with Peter Duchin and his orchestra; champagne and crepes at midnight at tables dressed in the Royal Swedish colors of blue and gold (the tablecloths are Fieldcrest's best yellow and white pinstriped sheets); and Regine, imported from New York, will hold forth with her tapes in a dramatically breathtaking red silk and gold foil discothèque, created for her by Countess Wachtmeister.

Ulla has single-handedly created that room," said Mrs. Ginsburg. "I couldn't believe it when I walked in — she is incredibly talented."

But Countess Wachtmeister said hastily, "I hope you won't focus on me — there are so many people who have worked on this to make it a success." Mrs. Ginsburg, who knows everyone in town, has involved almost everyone in town. Ejily Malino, the designer who is the wife of Representative James H. Scheuer, has designed the tents' interiors, 17 embassy sears giving pre-ball dinner parties, and the committee sparkles with such names as Nancy Kissinger, Mrs. Bert Lance and Elizabeth Taylor Warner.

Style and Ambiance

But in the three years since Count Wilhelm Wachtmeister was appointed ambassador to Washington—ending a 15-month diplomatic freeze between Stockholm and Washington as a result of the United States bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong—the Swedish Embassy has become celebrated for its style and ambiance, and invitations from the Wachtmeisters are snapped up.

Ulla Wachtmeister is a professional artist. Her paintings, which hang throughout the embassy have been exhibited in this country and abroad, and the three dozen banners, hand sewn and painted on raw silk, cotton and canvas, are a striking example of her artistry.

"They are all from my imagination—sort of spur-of-the-moment doodling—just like a child," she said. They are all signed and will be hung again later

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wewhere during the
"for our own little toast," said
the Countess.

this year when she gets around to having a Washington showing of her paintings. "I like expressing myself in different media, and I hope to fill a whole gallery with my things," she said.

It was only this morning that Ulla Wachtmeister climbed out of bed and decided to create some masks for the ball—one is to hang from her ballgown which she also made for the occasion. The skirt is sewn from a piece of white silk picked up for \$8 at the time she was shopping for banner material. And the blouse is made from an antique, hand-embroidered lace curtain that once hung in Gripsholm Castle, where her stepfather was Governor for a number of years.

But Washingtonians are still asking—why is the Opera Ball proving to be such a smash this year?

"Opera is in," explained one hostess, "because Jimmy Carter has already been to two."

Washington does take note of these things. In subtle ways a President can suddenly add a certain prestige to an art form that in the past has been appreciated by a relatively small audience.

In the early weeks of his presidency, he and Mrs. Carter slipped into a matinee performance of the Washington Opera's performance of "Madama Butterfly." And more recently they attended the New York City Opera's production of "The Barber of Seville" at the Kennedy Center.

"It definitely has helped that Carter is known to be an opera lover," said Mrs. Ginsburg, who shared the Presidential box during the latter performance.

More Guest to Be Added

"But," said Diana Kiker, wife of the CBS correspondent Douglas Kiker, "I think it's working because of all the people involved—it's much easier to talk your husband into it if you just know it's going to be both pretty and fun."

So they have decided to try to squeeze in another hundred people. They have added another tent and "that lamb Ardeshir is going to take 40 for dinner rather than 18, and Orfila is going to take 60 dinner guests instead of 30."

"That lamb Ardeshir and Orfila" are respectively Ardeshir Zahedi, the Iranian Ambassador, and Alejandro Orfila, Secretary of American States.

The celebrities have been appropriately divided among the embassy dinner parties. The new CIA director, Stansfield Turner, can be found at the Turkish Embassy; Senator Edward W. Brooke and the Smith Bagleys will be dining at the Japanese Embassy; The Robert J. Lipshutzes—he is counsel to the President—and the Howard Bakers will sit down to filet of sole and crown of lamb at the British Embassy; and Anthony Bliss of the Metropolitan Opera, Mr. and Mrs. Robert A. Sarnoff—she is Anna Moffo—and Regine will be breaking bread at the Spanish Embassy.

And the Wachtmeisters plan a quiet little supper at home before the ball, at one of the tiny, candlelit tables in the ruby-red discothèque. It will be their 30th wedding anniversary.